

Roman Catholic Cathedral
(Cathedral of the Assumption)
Baltimore
Baltimore City County
Maryland

HABS MD-186

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ROMAN CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL OF BALTIMORE, now
MINOR BASILICA OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
(THE CATHEDRAL OF BALTIMORE)

HABS No. MD-186

Location: On the east side of Cathedral Street between Franklin and Mulberry Streets, Baltimore, Baltimore City County, Maryland

Present Use: Roman Catholic Cathedral

Brief Statement of Significance: This fine classical church, consecrated in 1821, was designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe and is the first cathedral established in the United States.

The present Cathedral of Baltimore occupies, with the adjacent rectory, two-thirds of a city block bounded by Cathedral, Mulberry, and Charles Streets. Within a stone and iron fence erected in 1841 [Sunpaper, Baltimore, Md., June 25, 1841, page 2] from the design of Robert C. Long, the structure is surrounded by lawns, flower beds, shrubbery and several large trees, while a brick walkway, about ten feet wide, completely encircles the foundations. A sexton's house, reputed to predate in part the Cathedral itself, stands on the north side of the main western approach, while the rectory is behind the apse. The area is excellently maintained and presents a pleasant island of greenery amid the surrounding business blocks.

The importance of the Cathedral, historically and architecturally, is patent. It is the first cathedral established in the United States and a summary of notable events connected with it can be read in Cuyler's chapter, "Historic Events." It is the design of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, perhaps America's first professionally trained architect, and is invariably mentioned in any discussion of the Classic Revival period, being described by Fiske Kimball as "the finest classical church in America."

Information has been drawn from the following:

- Cuyler, C. M.: The Baltimore Cathedral (Baltimore, Md., 1951).
- Hamlin, Talbot: Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the man and the architect (Maryland Historical Magazine 37:339-360, December 1942).
- Hamlin, Talbot: Benjamin Henry Latrobe (New York, Oxford University Press, 1955, chapter 12).
- Kimball, Fiske: Latrobe's designs for the Cathedral of Baltimore (Architectural Record 42:540-550, December 1917; 43:37-45, January 1918).
- Latrobe, B. H.: The following description of the Roman Catholic Cathedral...from the pen of the architect (The American, Baltimore, Md., 42:2, May 16, 1821).
- Riordan, M. J.: Cathedral Records (Baltimore, Md., The Catholic Mirror, 1906, Chapters 4 and 13).

Sturges, W. K.: A bishop and his architect (Liturgical Arts, 17:53-64, February 1949).

Also, the sexton, Charles Connor, third generation of his family in the post, added details.

The shape of the building is a Latin cross 226 feet, 11 inches, long, domed at the crossing and fronted on the west with an Ionic portico (for the floor plan, see Hamlin's book, page 243). The exterior, of grey Ellicott City granite, is one story with basement. Above the windows the bays are emphasized by panels which, like the entablature, are of painted freestone; reliefs were projected but never placed on the panels. The transept entries are within vaulted, recessed vestibules. Two towers topped with exotic onion domes flank the portico. The crossing dome is saucer shaped, raised on steps and topped with a cross.

A shallow narthex opens to aisles and nave separated by piers supporting barrel vaults, groined vaults, and saucer domes on pendentives; the crossing dome is on a drum. Transept galleries are supported on columns; two small galleries are above the narthex. Attached columns ring the semicircular apse.

The architect submitted two sets of plans (both preserved in the Cathedral archives), one for a building in Gothic style, the other Classic Revival. The latter being selected, the corner stone was laid July 9, 1806 [Griffith, T. W.: Annals of Baltimore (Baltimore, Md., Woody, 1833)]. John Hillen was builder and John Rohrback, clerk of the works, until succeeded by James Hayden, who served from 1817 to 1821. Consecration took place in 1821 [Griffith, T. W.: Annals of Baltimore (Baltimore, Md., Woody, 1833)]. The south tower was completed in 1831, when the bells were hung; the north, in 1837. Foundation for the portico was begun in 1841; Eben Faxon was called upon to modify the original design and the work was complete in 1863, constructed of drab colored sandstone from Nova Scotia, floored with marble and ceiled with cast iron. To serve as sacristy, a wing was built in 1879 extending north from the chancel. In 1890 the east end was lengthened---33 feet, according to Cuyler; 36 feet, 9 inches, according to Riordan.

Lesser changes preceded the renovation of 1943/7 described below. Windows were cut under the portico, to light the gallery, in 1865. A marble floor replaced a wooden one in the sanctuary in 1879. Olmstead stoves were placed in the unheated building in 1838. Some time after the Civil War furnaces were installed with four low chimneys rising about the base of the dome. Electricity is reported brought in in 1895; gas evidently was in use, as brackets on the piers (in a photograph of 1905) show burners combined with the bulbs. The present chandeliers were hung in the 1920's.

The earliest interior, of plaster on brick with wood trim, was never clearly described but the most recent decorating job aspired to return to a "cool grey" color scheme of the original building. In 1865 a rich, colorful treatment, featuring red sienna scagliola panels

and columns and much gilt, was introduced and, in 1906, the Italian Renaissance inspired "circular paintings of the Evangelists, on the wall above the rotunda columns, linked by gold mosaic work."

After the outbreak of World War II the possibility of extensive damage was feared. The Cogswell Construction Company of Baltimore made a survey resulting in an up-to-date set of drawings (now in the archives) and also made a model of the east end of the building with which experiments in relocating the altar could be tried. Then in 1943 renovations continuing to 1947 were undertaken. The original marble-jambed west door was supplemented by two smaller, flanking entries. The nine windows in north and south walls, which had small, frosted panes, were filled with stained glass created by Conrad Schmitt of Milwaukee.

Aloft, the twenty-four "skylight windows" in the dome were closed. The copper surface (echoed by the tower domes, while the balance of the roof is covered with tin), which had been gilded in 1904, was returned to its natural color and a low ventilating lantern added supporting the cross. The chimneys were taken down, the building now being heated by main steam. Inside, the entire floor was laid with green Cardiff marble and paint of pale colors and pastel-toned mural decorations (mentioned unfavorably by Hamlin) completed the changes, with which the building was brought to its present appearance.

Prints and photographs, in the collections of the Maryland Historical Society and the Enoch Pratt Free Library, are listed below in chronological order.

- Watercolor of the exterior, by B. H. Latrobe (?), not signed, about 1820, showing the building as it would appear when finished.
- Engraved vignette of the exterior on Poppleton's "Plan of the City of Baltimore," 1823.
- Engraving of the interior by W. Goodacre, 1831.
- Engraving of the exterior in Picture of Baltimore, Baltimore, Md., Lucas, 1832.
- Wood engraving of the interior, 1840 (from a newspaper).
- Engraving of the exterior by Pratt, from the Monthly Budget, February 1841.
- Oil painting of a military encampment with the Cathedral in the background, after 1837.
- Wood engraving of the exterior, from Harper's Weekly, October 27, 1866.
- Engraving by "Saugwein" (?)
- Photograph of a painting by Sauerwein, of the exterior, about 1875.
- Photograph of the south side, about 1890.
- Photograph of the southwest corner, about 1890.
- Photograph of the south side, about 1910.
- Photograph of the east end, about 1914.

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Photograph of the interior, about 1920.
Etching by Delise, 1924.
Photograph of the front, 1936.
Photograph of the south side, 1936.

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